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**Resisting Neoliberalism: The challenge of activist librarianship in English Higher Education**

**1. Introduction**

At a time when the transformatory implications of the 2010 Browne Review on Higher Education (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010) are being realised across HE in England, considerations of the political position of the university are pertinent. In terms of both its centrality to university life and its intrinsic connection to the formation and organisation of knowledge, the library has enduring practical and symbolic importance, in spite of often being overlooked as if it were a neutral depository of information. Whether in the form of physical books and articles, in providing access to their electronic counterparts, or purely in providing space where academic and social lives are performed, academic libraries exist within a political context and communicate values through the way they are imagined, constructed, and engaged with. On the disciplinary side, Library and Information Studies (LIS) departments offering professionally accredited courses are influential because they have the authority to qualify, and thus shape, future academic librarians. As a discipline within the academy, LIS departments are also in a position to intervene in academic and popular discussions about the role of information, power, politics, and culture in academia and society more generally.

This article investigates the ways in which neoliberal processes related to competition, managerialism, and student employability have infiltrated English Higher Education, what effect this is having on the running of Academic Libraries and LIS departments within the HE sector, and what opportunities there might be for resisting these developments. By drawing upon the Gramscian understanding of hegemony in culture, as well as more recent post-structural understandings of neoliberalisation, we aim to shine a light on how processes of neoliberalisation are developing in the context of English academic librarianship. We argue that the permeation of neoliberal values within English HE is having a restrictive, and ultimately negative, impact on higher education and on our understanding of the library's role and function within it. We go on to consider the Radical Librarians Collective – a collective of “those critical of the marketization of libraries and commodification of information”(RLC, n.d) – and argue that the collective has potential to help organise efforts to contest and subvert these processes of neoliberalisation and resist the narrowing of the purpose and possibilities of academic librarianship.

**2. Methodology**

The article aims to make an original and critical theoretical contribution to the LIS literature. We develop a critical theoretical framework drawing primarily upon the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and praxis, and post-structural critiques of neoliberalism, as a lens through which to observe developments within the field of academic librarianship vis-à-vis broader processes of neoliberalisation. We illustrate and expand upon our theoretical arguments by drawing upon a small empirical study examining how senior practitioners and academics in the field of academic librarianship, who between them have worked across three English universities in the last decade, relate to these broader processes of neoliberalisation. Further, we critically consider how participants in the UK-wide Radical Librarians Collective are working to contest some of the trends that we identify.

Rather than inductively generate or deductively test theory based on empirical observation, the philosophical approach drawn upon in this study is critical, normative and abductive in nature. We aim to illuminate *particular moments* of neoliberal hegemonic reproduction and contestation observed in our empirical research, through the lens of the Gramscian analytical framework outlined in the following sections. In adopting this philosophical approach in our research, we recognise that

knowledge of the social world is the outcome of many competing insights and knowledge claims. The objective of our research is to contribute to the debate, rather than attempt to generate 'scientific' knowledge of the social. As such, while the findings are necessarily subjective, they are the result of critical reflection and thus hold validity within the philosophical framework.

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Six interviews with individuals from three groups of actors were conducted: at the time of the research two were LIS academics who teach and research academic librarianship, one a senior academic library manager, and three library workers and researchers involved in the Radical Librarians Collective (RLC). These categorisations reflect each participant's primary identification; however, some participants had recently changed roles or belonged to more than one category. If appropriate, quotations in the article therefore make reference to the role that the participant was discussing at that point in the interview; a quotation from a "Library manager" may therefore indicate any one of a number of participants talking about a senior academic library management role they currently or previously held. Due to the political sensitivity of the topics discussed, participants have been anonymised to general categories, rather than through use of pseudonyms. Reflecting the concerns of the Gramscian framework, interviews explored the nature of the interviewee's role and motivations, and their perceptions of the librarianship profession, Higher Education and its purpose. Interviews also considered critical alternatives to neoliberalism in academic librarianship, in terms of both everyday practice and the processes of organising resistance among active groups. As well as interviews, participant observation was conducted at the Radical Librarians Collective (RLC) gathering in London on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2014. Field notes were taken that aimed to capture how ideas and experiences of neoliberalisation in LIS were discussed by participants and how methods for resistance and contestation were explored. Observations were made about the structure, format and processes of the Collective, and its principles of organisation. Documentary evidence published on the website of the Radical Librarians Collective was also collected, and throughout the research project a reflective diary was kept, which contributed to the researcher's critical reflection on experiences encountered and data collected.

All data were transcribed, and the data were thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) based upon concepts emerging from the theoretical framework related to neoliberalisation and the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and praxis. Indicative themes include, for example, "business language", "library ethics", "example of critical librarianship". Critical reflections of RLC processes were also guided by post-structural feminist considerations relating to freedom, organisation, and intersectionality (Ahmed, 2014; Weeks, 2013). We also drew on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013) to analyse the adoption of neoliberal linguistic patterns within the language of interviewees. Though originating within the field of applied linguistics, CDA is a transdisciplinary methodology which aims to draw out the relationships between discourse and wider social and political structures (Fairclough, p. 3).

Whilst the scope of this empirical study is relatively small, its aim is to draw attention to some of the concrete ways in which processes of neoliberalisation are being incorporated and contested in the practice in English academic librarianship. All empirical data was collected in 2014, however where appropriate updates have been provided (e.g. changes to the online communications platforms used by RLC are noted). Further empirical investigation is required in order to explore in more depth key questions raised by this study.

### 3. Defining Neoliberalism

The concept of neoliberalism and the contingent processes of neoliberalisation have been researched across multiple disciplines, making an exhaustive summary beyond the scope of this article. A contested and sometimes controversial concept, neoliberalism tends to be understood as a ‘political rationality’ (Brown, 2015, p. 116) in which the perceived logic of “free markets” is accepted as the optimum way of solving problems and organising society. Never intended by its forbearers Hayek, von Mises and Friedman as a purely economic rationality, processes of neoliberalisation can now be observed across broad sections of society which previously would have been accepted as “off limits”, such as health care, social housing, and education. Commentators like sociologist Philip Mirowski and philosopher Slavoj Žižek have argued that this rationality has infiltrated our very personal lives through things like Facebook, dating, and consumer decision making (Mirowski, 2013; Žižek, 2009). Clearly then, the term neoliberalism extends beyond an instrumental understanding of deregulated, market-orientated economies to incorporate a code of ethics and a practice of living; the “common sense” of neoliberalism that demarcates the possibilities of what is sayable and knowable, and which also emphasises the individual and family – rather than collectivity and social welfare – as the basis for social organisation (Hall, 2011).

It is important to note the inherent inadequacy of using neoliberalism as a concept to encompass processes affecting diverse historical geographies (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Peck, 2010). However, in employing the term we follow the lead of Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall who argues that “critical thought often begins with a ‘chaotic’ abstraction” and that it is better to add “further determinations in order to reproduce the concrete in thought” than it is to abandon the term altogether (Hall, 2011, p. 706). Indeed, the hegemonic and often contradictory nature of neoliberalisation, which is reliant upon its dynamism, adaptability, and lack of ideological coherence (Peck, 2010) makes its “slippery” character inevitable.

**3.1 Neoliberal trends in English Higher Education**

Much recent research into English HE highlights not only its changing historic character over the last half century, but also the extent to which aspects of neoliberal ‘common sense’ now exist in its structure and everyday practice. Within the structure of HE, the Browne Review of 2010 marks the latest in a series of clear state implemented stages of marketization, with the reduction, and in the cases of Arts and Humanities the eradication, of central block grants for teaching. This decline in central funding coincides with the raising of the cap on individual student tuition fees and increasingly “invasive intervention of both private-sector corporations and government in the daily running of ‘public’ universities” (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009).

Between the 1970s and late 1990s, academic studies explored the hypothetical merits and demerits of passing funding for higher education from the state to the market (Colcough 1996, Tribe 1990). Then, following the election of the New Labour government (1997-2010) and spread of “Third Way” politics, research tended to become premised on the observation that market-orientation had become the norm, and the term “neoliberal” became more widespread within the literature (Collini 2013, Giroux 2013, Reay 2004, Whitener & Nemser, 2014). This more recent body of research has also tended to emphasise the cultural impact of neoliberalisation on Higher Education. For example, Gill (2010) examines the “attitudinal mindset” of the neoliberal academy (Gill 2013). This neoliberal “mindset” is perceived by Gill and others (e.g. Giroux 2013, Collini 2013, de Angelis & Harvie 2009) to be contributing to the degradation of the potential for a democratic, creative culture of education, in favour of market-driven processes of auditing and quantification of outputs (Collini, 2012; Brown & Carasso, 2013). Illustrations of this “audit culture” are visible in the various assessment frameworks that proliferate the academy, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the National Student Survey (NSS), and the numerous university league tables that are produced by media organisations (Collini, 2012, 2013; Brown & Carasso 2013; Gill, 2013). Whilst not criticising the

principle of Universities' accountability within society, nor idealising the more deeply elitist University culture of earlier years, critics make strong arguments against hyperactive quantification and its adverse effects upon research culture and the personal wellbeing of those engaged in Higher Education. It has been argued by several commentators that these processes which aim at accountability by "making things auditable" (Power, 1994, p.25) mark a shift from the role of the university as being to "engage in scholarly activity" to producing "research *out-put*" (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009, p10). The expectations created also reduce the autonomy of academics, encouraging them to tailor their interests to those subjects that are "marketable" to students and funding agencies, and generate anxieties in relation to job security, time pressures, and career development (Gill, 2013; Brooks & McKinnon eds. 2001).

### 3.2 Neoliberal trends in Library and Information Studies

Several themes emerge within the LIS academic literature that appear to reflect and contribute towards these processes of neoliberalisation.

First, we can observe a trend within library management research to adopt approaches from the corporate business management and strategy literature as a lens through which to understand, develop and promote LIS practice. This move echoes the wider scale adoption – since the 1980s - of a 'new managerialism' within the public sector, which emphasises the "primacy of management above all other activities" (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p. 220). In LIS, these market imaginaries are highlighted in Sen's (2006) findings that "in an increasingly competitive environment", most library managers view the adoption of a "market orientated strategy" as essential for survival (Sen, 2006, p.202). In related literature, we can also observe the reframing of library and information professional roles to sound similar to job roles found in the corporate private sector. For example, "Information Officers", "Knowledge Managers", "Strategic Service Managers" - among many others - have developed as job titles where previously Librarian encompassed them (Stoker, 1999). The rationale for this use of corporate language draws upon recurring allusions to a dichotomy between "traditional" and "contemporary" libraries and worlds (Henricks, S and Henricks-Lepp, 2014). In addition, at a time when public libraries are threatened, frequent references to how these new roles will raise the profile of libraries and be key to their survival are made (Astrom & Hansson, 2012; Corral et al 2013; Housewright, 2009; Renaud, 1990).

Second, we can observe a proliferation of Information Scientist and Data Scientist roles that are, in part, needed to process and manage the data required for the development of "audit cultures" and competitive markets within HE and other sectors (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009). For example, it has become part of the remit of library and information workers to check and implement REF compliance (University of Bristol website, n.d.). These trends give such roles prominence at a time when 'traditional' library roles are concurrently under fire, so potentially amount to a significant shift in the perception of library and information work in today's university.

Third, we can observe the enduring power of "scientific" empiricist methodologies within the field of LIS research, which discourages critical examination of neoliberal trends within LIS. Positivist and descriptive methods remain dominant within core parts of the discipline, with appreciation for critical and normative methodologies being limited relative to developments across the wider social sciences and humanities, including in similar practice-orientated disciplines such as education or journalism. Related to this, there have been observable efforts by some to claim scientific credibility for librarianship as an academic discipline by adopting positivist research philosophies and identifying the discipline as "Library Science" rather than Librarianship, and academic departments changing their names accordingly (Hjørland, 2005).



3.3 The development of Critical Library and Information Studies

In large part as a reaction against these trends in LIS research, a body of work inspired both by critical theory formally understood and grassroots critical practice (henceforth, Critical LIS) has been growing in recent years. While many of this field’s central concerns – such as, the relations and expression of power between individuals and institutions - are not new (see, for example, Usherwood 1989), their utilisation of theoretical concepts with which to explore and contest these processes has been less common. Critical theory is associated with left politics, and draws on a variety of schools of thought including Marxism and post-Marxism, anarchism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism. Unlike the empiricist and positivistic methodologies favoured by many LIS researchers (Radford, 1992, p211), critical approaches are often more abductive and normative in approach. In essence, this means illuminating and explaining observed social phenomenon through a particular theoretical lens, doing away with a ‘scientific’ view of knowledge, and instead recognising that knowledge about the social world is the outcome of competing insights and truth claims. They work at understanding and explaining the cultural, ideological and material factors that are behind texts, discourses, events, and actions. The use of critically inspired conceptual frameworks creates opportunities for lived scenarios to be examined in ways that question fundamental societal assumptions, and for increased understanding of how peoples’ actions contribute to the reproduction, subversion and amelioration of social relations. While critical approaches are multifarious, their commonality can be characterized in questions such as: “Who or what is heard? Who or what is silenced? Who is privileged? Who is disqualified? How are forms of inclusion and exclusion being created? How are power relations constructed and managed?” (Cannella 2010 in Schroeder & Hollister 2014). In the field of LIS, US based journals such as *The Progressive Librarian* and publishing houses like Library Juice Press, Libraries Unlimited, and Litwin Books publish work inspired by critical approaches that aim to “provide a forum for critical perspectives in Library and Information Science (LIS)” (Progressive Librarians Guild, n.d). In the UK the open-access *Journal of Radical Librarianship* has recently been established.

There are several common themes in Critical LIS, all of which are broadly related to a desire to problematize assumed societal norms and expose oppressive power relations. The role of the librarian/library worker is a common topic, with many writers calling for a re-imagination of librarians as “civic”, “progressive”, “transformative”, “lifecycle”, “activist” or “radical”, as opposed to the technocratic, “gate-keeping”, and “neutral” identities favoured in the literature influenced by neoliberal imaginaries (Dilevko, 2009; Lewis eds. 2008). While arguably meaning very little on their own, these concepts are drawn from critical theorists such as Foucault, Freire, Giroux and Gramsci. Drawing on the ideas of these critical theorists, these authors are demanding the reconstruction of the power relations they observe between librarians and readers, as traditional gatekeepers of information or as transaction based service providers. Borrowing from Freire’s concept of the “dialogics” method of education, praxis orientated Critical LIS academics argue that librarians should join in education with library users, rather than act as “gatekeepers” of information (Leckie et al 2010; Lewis eds, 2008). Similarly, Accardi et al (2010) and Nectoux (2011) are among those arguing for the integration of critical theory with practice in the context of information literacy instruction in academic and public library settings. Whilst the academics mentioned above are based in the US, there is also a growing number of British academics identifying with Critical LIS, particularly with regard to the relationship of the Public Library to its social functions (eg. Grace & Sen, 2014; Huzar, 2014; Smith, 2013).

4. Theoretical Framework: a Gramscian approach

The ideas of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci are currently underutilised in LIS but provide a valuable framework for integrating analysis of the library and librarians within a broader schema involving society, the state and culture. Gramsci was an active leader whose writings were born of lived experience as a writer and leader of the Italian Communist Party in Italy (Hobsbawm in Gramsci, 2000). Whilst the economy and society that Gramsci wrote about was vastly different to our own, the marked differences with our post-industrial capitalist society do not limit Gramsci's efficacy. As he himself argued, the interconnected relationships between state and civil society actors that (re)produce and (re)create the world continually, means that his analysis was never intended to be rigidly adopted, but is a lens to be adapted and discarded in response to contemporary circumstance. As argued by Stuart Hall, it is a mistake to believe Gramsci "'has the answers' or 'holds the key' to our present troubles", rather "we must think our troubles in a Gramscian way" (Hall, 1991, p.1). In LIS, Raber (2003) most explicitly explores Gramsci's concept of the Organic Intellectual – activist leaders who emerge naturally from a workers group rather than educated through institutions – as a way to understand the cultural role of Librarians in reinforcing or contesting dominant ideologies. In this study, we use the interrelated Gramscian concepts of hegemony and praxis more explicitly to analyse developments in English academic librarianship and explore ways for LIS actors to counter processes of neoliberalisation.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony refers to the dominant ideology of a particular historic moment, and turns on the idea that power relations within political and civil society are shaped and upheld not only by force, but also by varying levels of cultural consent. This culturally orientated understanding of hegemony departs from economic deterministic interpretations of history and society, which claim that only a total overhaul of economic structures can lead to social transformation. Gramsci instead emphasises the importance of ideology and argues that the interrelation between the economic and the ideological over time produces hegemony. The economy and culture inform each other in a cycle, rather than culture being purely a reaction to economic conditions.

However, Gramsci also recognised that all hegemonies are a product of struggle with the counter-hegemonic, meaning that various ideologies always to some extent coexist in tension with one another. His ideas about the "organic intellectual", or the "man-in-the mass", emphasise both the fragile nature of hegemony and the agency of people to disrupt it. Since hegemony exists through the largely "passive" and "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group", there exists potential for hegemonic structures to experience moments of crisis where legitimacy is lost (Gramsci, p306-307).

We can observe that the neoliberal rationality described above broadly represents today's "hegemonic moment". Images of markets and market orientation dominate public and political discourse, even in the context of the recent financial crisis, which clearly demonstrated significant shortcomings in neoliberal economic policy and practice (Mirowski, 2013). As Dardot and Leval and others have argued, "we have not done with neo-liberalism" (Dardot & Leval, 2013, p1).

Yet, neoliberal hegemony can also be recognised as "incomplete" (Massey, 2013 p. 3). As Massey highlights in reference to her interaction with a "Customer Liaison" worker at an art exhibition, in spite of the dominant vocabularies of consumer culture, such transaction based exchanges often "overflow our assigned roles – maybe even [to the extent of] resisting them" (Massey, 2013, p. 3). The extent to which fractures have always, and continue to, exist within the neoliberal hegemonic moment is also evident in light of what Laclau and Mouffe term "the democratic revolution". The rise of "new antagonisms" such as the civil rights movement, feminism, environmentalism, and LGBTQI+ rights throughout the twentieth century, and alongside the emergence of neoliberalism, demonstrate that, as Gramsci argued, the counter-hegemonic also exists in a complex relationship with the hegemonic (Laclau & Mouffe p141, Borg et al, 2002). Clearly different strands of thought

and practice within each of these movements have different relationships to neoliberalism. For example, liberal strands of mainstream feminism, including most recently the “Lean-in” style feminism promoted by Sandberg (2013), are clearly at ease with wider processes of neoliberalisation, and have a very different relationship to it than those strands of feminist praxis that critically resist intersecting oppressive structures relating to class, race, gender, sexuality, disability and so on within the context of neoliberal hegemony. However, the emergence of these “new antagonisms” alongside neoliberalism illuminates the complex ways in which hegemonic processes of consent and counter-hegemonic struggle unfold. Additionally, as argued by J.K.Gibson-Graham (2006), non-capitalist practices have existed in all economies and part of resisting neoliberalism is in rejecting the discourse that suggests its complete hegemony. In relation to institutions like universities and libraries, we can observe that while strong trends of hegemonic thought may exist at policy level, there is significant struggle, reformation, and contestation happening at other levels.

Central to both Gramsci’s thinking and this research is the understanding that ideologies, principles, and outlooks do not exist separately from action, but that one’s way of looking at the world transforms reality, and directly effects the course of action chosen. Similarly, actions are not devoid of ideological significance and are seldom neutral. Gramsci recognises that people are often not aware of this significance, saying that:

“The active man-in-the mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity... [it] nonetheless involves his understanding the world in so far as it transforms it” (Gramsci, 2000).

For example, the use of the word “customer” to describe library users, whilst often viewed as either benign or pragmatic and necessary (Bothwell, 2016), has the cultural effect of subtly instilling a corporate and transactional relationship between library staff and users. For Gramsci, the way to counter unconsciously supporting such processes was to align theory explicitly with practice through “praxis”. Praxis is commonly defined as meaning “the realisation of theory as practice” (Bales & Engle 2012) and is a concept with direct relevance to library workers seeking to contest neoliberalism. Praxis goes beyond a static application of principles to action, instead recognising that principles and actions shape one another in an ongoing process. Critical reflection is therefore crucial within praxis: a process of conscious reflection which creates vantage points from which new ‘conscious’ actions stem, in an ongoing cycle, leading to what Gramsci calls “a critical understanding of self.” This self-conscious understanding moves from the personal to the general: “first in the ethical field and then in that of politics in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality” (Gramsci, 2000 pp. 333-334).

**5. Academic librarianship in English Higher Education: why do we need activist librarianship?**

The article now moves on to draw upon the above discussion in order to draw attention to some of the concrete ways that we observe processes of neoliberalisation playing out in practice in our empirical data. We begin by exploring the foregrounding of “competitive” values and the role of employability in our conversations with academic library managers and academics. We then turn to perceptions of critical pedagogies amongst those that teach academic librarianship to student librarians.

In our conversations with participants who either currently, or had previously, held a position in senior academic library management, we observed frequent reference to ideas and practices that echo neoliberal values in relation to competition, markets and employment. The idea of “competition” between departments and universities dominated conversation, clearly demonstrating a shift away from the idea of higher education as a “system” reliant on the shared



values of public education to one based on enterprise (Holmwood 2014, p63). As one library manager exemplified *"the success of the university is measured in our ability to recruit students, and to win research grants and things"* and *"back in 1987... if a university didn't recruit well in a particular year...we might have tutted about it, but it wouldn't have had the direct financial impact it has now"* (Interview: Library Manager). Similarly, another interviewee mentioned a colleague's observation that *"all I see when I see students walking through the library is the 'pound' signs on their backs"* (Interview: Library Manager). During an argument made in favour of multi-disciplinary courses, a library manager illustrated the outdatedness of single subject degrees with the example of *"French Literature"*; the implication being that, on its own at least, this was not a marketable subject and therefore not valuable. Whilst this may not have been the personal view of the manager, the repetition of such claims is indicative of the new norm that education must be marketable, especially in the English HE system where payment has become so individualised. As Collini (2012) observes, this "business analogy" extends to the fact that student recruitment relates not only to the "cash flow" of a particular institution, but also to its "market position" - to the fact that Universities "want students to come to [this] university, rather than to X, say, or Y". In this sense, the ability of individual students to pay (or take on debt) make them a bargaining chip in a way that they were not in the time of centralised government funding (Collini, 2012), and this is evidently understood in academic library managers references to market positions. The centrality of 'competition' and the reduction of 'quality' and 'success' to monetary calculations in our conversations with academic library managers demonstrates the influence of neoliberal rationality within the everyday practices of English academic librarianship. In adopting and using the language and practices of neoliberalism, whether consciously or unconsciously, academic library managers are absorbed into the wider restructuring of English HE.

However, it is somewhat less clear how welcome these developments are. As one interviewee stressed, there are various attitudes towards these developments within English Universities. Seeing students as "pound signs" arguably only indicates the challenges faced by library managers, which – in the context of neoliberal hegemony - are not entirely of their choosing. The library manager is not wrong to say that "success" is "measured" when surveys such as the National Student Survey and University league tables directly influence student recruitment and therefore Universities' financial viability. The managers and academics also noted that many aspects of enforced competition within English HE have been demonstrably ineffective and unsuitable. There was a feeling from some that sectors such as education and health should be distinct from market and profit driven logics: *"in the health sector that value...that higher moral value is of making the information as openly accessible as possible for people, as it's a human right"* (LIS Academic, 2014). Further, in spite of these utterances of competition, there also remains a strong tradition of cooperation in the library sector through forums such as mailing lists and the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) special interest groups. Thus, despite the drive for an increasingly competitive market within English HE and the deepening profit orientation encroaching on universities, amongst the academic library managers and LIS academics we spoke to some resistance to a purely neoliberal logic appeared to stand in the way of its full hegemony.

However, despite these ambivalent attitudes towards the marketization of English HE, the use of business language was common by academic library managers and academics. As argued by Doreen Massey, "the language we use has effects in moulding identities and characterising social relationships" (2013, p3), and the specific words people use therefore influence how processes of neoliberalisation play out in practice. The academic library managers and academics we interviewed frequently employed vocabularies connected with the business world. For example, the terming of research as *"outputs"*, the development of plans as *"going forward"*, and the reduction of the relationship between librarian and student to that of a *"customer"* relationship were commonplace. The effect of such terms is not only to call to mind transactional, economic relationships, but, as

Massey observes, also contributes to the normalisation of such relationships and the absorption of neoliberal values into HE.

Beyond market-orientated references, academics that teach academic librarianship also highlighted that developing “employability skills” in their students was fundamental to their teaching of librarianship, both to fulfil the expectations of their parent institution and CILIP - the UK’s LIS accreditation body. Academics cited student demands for employability skills in order to justify further this emphasis: “Students *need* jobs” (Interviews: Academic). A library manager also referred to the employability agenda:

*“Employability can be a misleading term, because it implies that students are only coming to university to get jobs, whereas actually what we’re talking about is giving students life skills and encouraging them to participate in society (Interviews: Library Manager).*

Whilst arguing that university is about more than jobs, the fact that “life skills” are used to explain what comes under the official label of “employability” - rather than, say, “citizenship” - reflects the deepening demand and challenge for individuals to engage in paid labour in the context of neoliberal hegemony. Further, it points to the normalisation of such forms of neoliberal rationality in everyday life. In this sense, “work” becomes a value in itself, making “employability” something akin to a virtue. As Weeks argues, post-industrial capitalism encourages the engendering of a society where who we *are*, what we *do*, is expressed overwhelmingly through work: “the fact that at present one must work to “earn a living” is taken as part of the natural order rather than as a social convention” (Weeks, 2011, p3).

It would be naïve to suggest that students would be or should be unconcerned about employment. Ultimately, students’ needs are heavily shaped by the hegemonic constructs of the societies they live within, and if these constructs stress economic individualism, whilst also propagating a culture of economic fear and insecurity, what students’ perceive they need from HE will likely be “employability”. As the success of English universities becomes increasingly dependent upon the accumulation and circulation of numbers of students, these students’ employability becomes a key bargaining chip in the higher education market. In order to recruit students, and thus remain financially viable, universities must appeal to the perceived wants and needs of the student as a consumer with individual purchasing power. In relation to this, LIS academics we interviewed cited student demand as a major driver on course content. However, in simply following “student choice”, universities reposition themselves as a service, rather than something that pre-existed and will exist after ‘the student’. In this sense, “student choice” denies any intrinsic integrity of Higher Education: the idea that, as a student, you join and participate in an educational culture in which that education is negotiated by members of the community, rather than it being a product that is sold to you. Instead, in the neoliberal University, students tell the university what they “want”, and the University re-shapes itself to these consumer demands (Collini 2010, 2013; Brown and Carasso, 2013).

When asked about more critical pedagogical approaches, for example making more use of theoretically informed reflective practice in LIS, one academic was sceptical arguing that such reflections could lead to “*idealistic...navel-gazing*” and had to bring about “*real positive change*”. In addition, repeated distinctions between “*the ideal*” or “*idealistic*” and “*the real*” - what they perceived to be “*realistic*” or “*pragmatic*” - suggest an air of dismissiveness towards theoretically informed librarianship for its own sake. Similarly, phrases such as “*playing the game*”, “*like it or not*”, “*there’s no two ways about it*”, “*we’ve got to go with the flow*” and “*speaking the language [with] business tools*” were common, and indicate a perceived lack of agency in terms of resisting neoliberal trends amongst academic library managers and academics. The language of these

“common-sense” dichotomies, said “intuitively, without foresight and reflection” and often seeming “eminently sensible”, nevertheless have the effect of reducing alternatives to sounding hopeless, ill-informed, and fanciful (Hall, 2011). Gramsci's conception of the social is instructive here, since it reminds us there is a connection between language and material reality: “every language contains the elements of a conception of the world” (Gramsci, 2000, p.326). In contrast, the common sense, pragmatic approach insists that this connection does not exist, that we must “*speak the language*” of business in order to be heard, without acknowledging the affect that this compromise has on material reality.

It is clear from the above discussion, that there is some ambivalence within parts of English academic librarianship regarding the marketization of higher education and the academic library's role in this process. Yet, whilst the academic library managers and academics expressed some hesitancy, none articulated a counter position to these hegemonic processes. Rather, discussion orientated around the need for academic libraries to adapt to the neoliberal values and practices absorbing the sector.

## 6. Radical Library Collective: alternative practices of librarianship

Unlike the academic library managers and academics interviewed, participants in the Radical Librarians Collective (RLC) were actively engaged in developing means through which to counter neoliberal hegemonic processes across the UK's library sector, including in English academic librarianship. In this section, we consider RLC as one potential site of resistance to neoliberalisation within academic librarianship.

Conceived in 2013, Radical Librarians Collective came about through serendipitous exchanges between several librarians from various sectors on the social networking site Twitter. The librarians took to Twitter to articulate their frustration with the neoliberalisation of librarianship as a practice and discipline, and their desire to “*get to the root*” of librarianship (Interviews: RLC Librarian). Interviewees described it as a moment of “*Do you think what I think? We should do something about this!*” (Interviews; RLC Librarian). These and other librarians came together under the banner of the Radical Librarians Collective (RLC) in order to create “*a space to challenge, to provoke, to improve and develop the communications between like-minded radicals, to galvanise our collective solidarity against the marketisation of libraries and the removal of our agency to our working worlds and beyond*” (RLC blog, 2013). As such, RLC works as an umbrella collective but also aims to encourage resistance within places of work across the library sector, including in academic libraries.

People involved in RLC come from various backgrounds: library workers and supporters, both qualified and unqualified, employed and unemployed, from across the UK and Ireland. Four annual “unconferences” have now been organised in Bradford, London, Huddersfield and Brighton, attended by a wide variety of librarians, library supporters, students, and academics, and involving library workers from across the sector and at all levels from casual staff to senior managers. RLC chooses not to define its politics explicitly, but rather aims at facilitating the creation and growth of a “horizontilist” space for discussion and action, which is the sum of its participants' diversity. For one member, RLC was “*about values - personal, core, emotional values*” (Interview: RLC Librarian), rather than sector orientated policy decisions. While one RLC interviewee suggested that most of the organising participants “*would probably identify most strongly with...anarchist politics*”, it was also stressed that the aim of the word “radical” was to be inclusive (Interview: RLC Librarian).

Reading lists and shared resources that participants compile on subjects such as Critical LIS, politics, philosophy and alternative publishers illustrate how important collective engagement is to RLC. What most clearly mirrors RLC's commitment to a Gramscian form of “praxis”, however, is the

strong emphasis placed on striving to act “*prefiguratively*” (Interview: RLC Librarian). As one interviewee said, the most important principle for RLC is that “*you do your politics the way you want things to be*” (Interview: RLC Librarian). Drawing on Gramsci’s conceptualisation of praxis, we can observe that this form of prefigurative politics is essential to a counter-hegemonic group insofar as it actively seeks to inculcate a behaviour and practice, at the same time as developing an argument that rejects the hegemonic culture (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). RLC’s growth turns on their understanding that the material world cannot change without a change in discourse, making unity between the practice of ideas and the ideas themselves essential for their self-realisation.

The diversity of occupational status among RLC participants affects the style of conversations that happen both face-to-face and online, and often leads to fruitful collaborative projects. As has been argued by Sherman (2008) in relation to the Social Forum process, the creation of an “open” space that is not prescribed, restricted, or connected to hierarchical parent organisations is essential for a counter-hegemonic structure to become possible. At RLC’s gathering at the London Action Resource Centre (LARC) on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2014 the ramshackle feeling of the building, with its homemade library, do-it-yourself kitchen, and mish-mash of old furniture produced a relaxed, easy-going atmosphere. Attendees had collective ownership of the space, and rearranged it to suit their needs. RLC interviewees stated the importance of choosing radical spaces: “*[they] aren’t there to create profit or generate income; they’re there to allow people to have conversations...there’s not the institutional baggage [of traditional conferences]*”. Another RLC participant agreed: “*space has a lot to do with the conversations you have with people and the way you think about what you can do with those conversations*”. Just as adopting the language of business encourages and normalises the incorporation of neoliberal values and practices in academic libraries, so here, making efforts to make space open, non-hierarchical, and community-focused, helped make the conversation more open, less hierarchical, and more community-focused.

At an individual level, RLC participants reflect a commitment to counter-hegemonic praxis by stressing the importance of personal everyday action in the workplace. Reflective practice emerged through interviews with RLC Librarians as a popular method for engaging critically with their roles as librarians. Although the time pressured environment of work in academic libraries presented a challenge to regular reflection, one interviewee commented how “*sitting down every now and again, like every week, and just writing about what has happened that day...[thinking about] what was going on...helps you process your thoughts*.” Similarly, reflecting on “*the things that are frustrating you*” as well as those things you love was perceived to help crystallise what is important to the job, and what things should be resisted where possible at work (Interview: RLC Librarian). Another argued that “*if you’re not reflecting on your own practice then you’re doing it wrong...many (LIS) academics are checking themselves all the time*” (Interview: RLC Librarian). This statement echoes Gramsci’s belief in the importance of obtaining “a critical understanding of self” through consciously evaluating personal positions and practices in relation to wider society. Since a key component of Gramsci’s “praxis” was a “practical awareness of the contradictions in society,” Gramsci implies that broader societal phenomena have “practical” everyday manifestations (Gramsci, 2000, p.429). Deliberate awareness of this can lead to fresh, informed action that better addresses the existence of intersecting oppressions. That RLC participants adopt this practice individually and across the broader collective is indicative of their counter-hegemonic potential.

While some RLC participants gave the impression that large-scale, collective lobbying and campaigning was their primary aim, others stressed that “molecular” changes and grassroots organisation were, for them, more important. Some implied that to go for bigger scale changes would be damaging:

*“I get a little tired with everybody going: ‘But we have to change the profession because then people at the top will take us seriously and then we can influence the government and...blah*

1  
2  
3 *blah blah. [Focusing on that] becomes the be all and end all. For me, [it's] all about*  
4 *organising, finding other people, it's about going out and networking and then going out into*  
5 *the community and organising there, or organising amongst the people I'm working with"*  
6 (Interview: RLC Librarian).

7 In practice, these grassroots actions within the workplace included "guerrilla collection  
8 development" - introduced by an RLC subject librarian as consciously seeking to buy non-mainstream  
9 and critical items to go alongside the more standard reading list items: "*secretly developing this*  
10 *whole alternative collection*" (Interview: RLC Librarian). While some might find that a kind of  
11 partiality that librarians are supposed to avoid (CILIP, 2013), since the mainstream items remained,  
12 the guerrilla development ultimately results in a more comprehensive collection. Others organised  
13 staff discussion groups, and instigated everyday conversations with students about information  
14 ethics, critical information literacy, and non-proprietary software. These actions display an  
15 appreciation for the importance of "praxis" as a form of resistance: they focus on noticing a  
16 contradiction, actively reflecting on it, and changing it in a "*molecular manner*". As Gramsci  
17 recognised, bypassing these stages and going straight to the "great aim" would instead risk  
18 continuing to act within the hegemonic moment of neoliberalism, with the hope that "once  
19 [activists] get in power" they can then go back and change everyday practice.  
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## 22 **7. The future development of activist Librarianship**

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25 Whilst key aspects of RLC's praxis position the collective as a potentially important site of  
26 contestation to processes of neoliberalisation across the UK library sector, including in English  
27 academic librarianship, our research indicates that further development of the collective's  
28 organisational structure and processes may be needed in order to strengthen its capacity in this  
29 regard. We now move on to engage critically with the governance of RLC, and explore opportunities  
30 for future development. This is done in the spirit of agonism, a form of critical engagement that is  
31 not necessarily "oppositional or inherently contestational", but that "anticipates resistance to all  
32 efforts to institute and maintain equality or justice" (Honig, 2013). The critique is offered with  
33 awareness of the many challenges facing any activist collective, recognising that the issues we  
34 identify are not unique to RLC. Our suggestions aim at enhancing the possibility for collaborative and  
35 inclusive activist librarianship. We begin by discussing the national structure of RLC and how  
36 potential participants may engage with it, prior to discussing the online network through which  
37 participants in the collective engage. We then move on the micro level and discuss the  
38 organisational dynamics of the 2014 RLC gathering.  
39

40  
41 An understanding that trust, honesty and solidarity are essential for a genuinely open collective is  
42 evident in many aspects of RLC's online communications, and it is clear that participants are aware  
43 of tensions around unwanted "elites" being formed. Some interviewees said they feared being seen  
44 as "*THE Radical Librarians Collective People*" (Interview: RLC Librarian). Nevertheless, in the online  
45 communications of RLC there is a tension present between being vague about who RLC participants  
46 are - merely "those critical of marketization" (RLC, n.d) - while at the same time presenting an  
47 explicit position about what the group does and what it believes, as though it were a discrete  
48 collective (RLC, 'About', n.d). It is hard for an 'outsider' to know where to start, and one interviewee  
49 acknowledged that they "*had an 'in' because I am friends with some of them*" suggesting there was  
50 a chance "*it could be seen as cliquy*", even though they themselves did not have that experience  
51 (Interview: RLC librarian). Reflection on how "discourse" is about more than speech acts, and how  
52 "structurelessness" can beget informal hierarchies (Freeman, 1971), may help to address some of  
53 these issues. For example, RLC could explore the ways in which the general approach to developing  
54 the collective does and does not reflect its "collective" ethos. Reflecting on how 'open' processes are  
55 in terms of collective planning both online and offline, and exploring opportunities to engage in  
56 robust discussion about what the essential tenets of the "collective" are might contribute to  
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deepening the practice of collectivity. This is perhaps something RLC participants have recognised themselves, as since this research was conducted it appears that RLC have begun discussions aimed at addressing such concerns around structure and process. This is a positive development and could be something the collective periodically engage in.

Although the South East group of RLC meets regularly, at a national level RLC meets only once a year and thus exists primarily online. Therefore, it is important that RLC's ethos of horizontilism and inclusivity permeates the virtual network. At the time we conducted this research, RLC had a wikispace that reflected the collective's aim to practice prefigurative politics. However, the wiki was recognised by interviewees to be insufficiently used, and one interviewee expressed "*anxiety*" that only certain people received "*push notifications*" when new content was added, creating an unwanted and unintended "*nexus of power*" (Interview: RLC Librarian). A different RLC interviewee also expressed their discomfort that private emailing between a sub-group of participants was often preferred in practice, without there being a formal organising committee. They recalled that plans for the 'collective' could sometimes be developed in private, before one person in the sub-group raised a concern by pointing out - "*I don't think we can [take this decision]*" (Interviews: RLC Librarian). Interviewees stressed the importance of the wiki to RLC, but also intimated that they no longer fully kept track of it and said it was not working to its full potential. Relative to conversations happening through private email and on Twitter, members of the collective only infrequently updated the wiki, and the same few people made most contributions on it. In contrast to private emails, a wiki is more inclusive and collaborative - all members of a wiki project are able to create and edit pages, and the software is deliberately simple. A wiki therefore reflects better the open and non-hierarchical principles of RLC, and could help the community grow online through visible channels of communication. In many cases, it may therefore be a better primary method of communication and organisation for RLC than email. Again, since this research was conducted there are positive signs that RLC participants are working to address some of these challenges. The collective have experimented with the consensus decision making tool, Loomio, and collaborative document making through Sandstorm. More recently, RLC have established a Jisc mailing list that is open to anyone who subscribes, as well as creating a more formal "organising committee" which has improved transparency and participants' intention is to rotate the committee for different gatherings.

A further area for critical reflection is in relation to how forms of exclusion and marginalisation can arise within "structureless" groups during face-to-face meetings. As observed during the RLC gathering in May 2014, gender is an important area where RLC – while streets ahead of many groups – could improve. Despite librarianship being a predominantly female profession, and the majority of attendees at the gathering being female, the organisation of the event on the day felt like quite a male dominated experience. While those people who appeared to be the key organisers were a balanced mix of genders, only one of the female organisers spoke publicly during the day, with the majority of the day's facilitation led by men. The most visible female planner was also in charge of catering. While it is important to recognise that not everyone would find this gendering of activity a problem - and the woman involved explicitly didn't, insisting on the various ways that power works beyond gender (RLC Librarian: Interview) - it is equally essential to consider how this arrangement could be perceived and internalised by others, and what it might communicate to those outside of, or on the margins of, RLC. A series of workshops formed the core of activity during the unconference, and participants arranged these by spontaneously "pitching" ideas for sessions at the start of the day. Similar to the overall facilitation of the day, these pitches were male dominated. In the morning session, only two women "pitched" out of seven and, subsequently, their workshops were timetabled at the same time. Participants pitched workshop ideas again in the afternoon, and while several more women pitched, the proportion relative to men was still low when one considers the gender balance of the profession as a whole. Moreover, at the London gathering a "feminism"

workshop was the only one in which participants were not comfortable with feeding back to the main group during the end of day plenary, with no explanation given for why this was the case. The awkward silence that followed this moment appeared to be indicative of an inclusivity problem that participants had not addressed successfully throughout the course of the day. As has been argued by Ahmed (2013) and Franken (2016), diversity among contributors can and should be deliberately sought in advance of an event, rather than being left to chance. Without diversity, men should withhold their participation, and the organisation of the gathering should be rigorously investigated (Franken, 2016).

Wider inclusivity issues could also be addressed more systematically by RLC, and positively, participants in subsequent gatherings have begun exploring these issues. The building chosen in London – while great in other ways – was not fully accessible. The racial composition of attendees was overwhelmingly white, despite being held in one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. There also did not seem, to someone who was “on the outside”, to have been a conscious process in place regarding the spread of subjects for workshops during the day. Workshops on feminism and youth issues were organised, but the spread could be wider in the future, especially when questions of marginalisation and power are so intrinsic to the history of librarianship. There is an understandable sense in which free, collective, groups should be free to do whatever those who have volunteered with their free time want to do. However, radical collectives should at least reflect on the way that neoliberal hegemony – which in this case is dominated by white, straight, often male, “able” people – affects us all, and how challenging these hegemonic constructs may involve *deliberately* articulating alternative values. As sociologist Sara Ahmed argues, when publicly available documentation reflect concerns that are restricted in scope but are labelled “open”, they can appear unwelcoming to commonly marginalised groups (Ahmed, 2013, np).

To counteract this, RLC could look into some of the many online resources aimed at helping people to organise diverse feminist gatherings, and potentially arrange training for meeting facilitation. For example, Ladyfest Sheffield has a “Guide to organising feminist events” which includes advice to reach out to other like-minded groups for support, and create a group “ethos” ahead of the event to “tell people what you stand for and what you are planning that will help people understand your group” (Ladyfest, n.d). The workers co-operative “Seeds for change” offer training on a range of issues pertinent to activists including facilitation and consensus decision making, as well as offering advice on “non-hierarchical organising and collaborative working” (Seeds For change, n.d.). US based organisation “Training for Change” also has online resources for “social change” groups including ice-breakers aimed at “diversity and anti-oppression” within meetings, strategy, and organisation (Training for Change, 2014). These resources would not only contribute to the ongoing development of the collective, but might also be useful for critically minded librarians in their workplaces.

Overall, RLC has the potential to become a space through which radical alternatives to neoliberal hegemony within librarianship can be explored and fostered. However, as with all activist groups, in order to continue the development of RLC participants’ “critical understanding of self”, it is important for participants to engage in ongoing reflection about how the collective’s practice is developing in line with its principles. As observed in the above discussion, some participants in the collective appear to have begun engaging in such a process and resultantly adapted some of the practices we observed in our research. Our recommendation is therefore for all participants to continue to actively work together to embed such reflective processes at the core of RLC, with particular consideration being given to issues of inclusive participation and collective governance, with the aim of enhancing the capacity and confidence of activist librarians in their efforts to counter processes of neoliberalisation in UK librarianship.

## 8. Conclusion

In this article, we drew upon a Gramscian framework to examine the impact of processes of neoliberalisation of HE on the academic library, and explored the Radical Library Collective as a possible site for fostering a radical alternative. Processes contributing to the institutionalisation of neoliberal values within HE are having a significant impact upon both the discipline of LIS, and the values and practice of academic librarianship. Our empirical work illustrated some of the ways that processes of neoliberalisation are being absorbed into the discourses and practices of academic library managers and academics. Whilst we observed some ambivalence regarding the marketization of higher education and academic libraries' relationship to this, in general the discourse of these interviewees was one of adapting, and thus consenting, to the absorption of neoliberal values and practices across English HE. In this sense, we observed neoliberal hegemony taking root – becoming “common sense” -- in academic librarianship, with little articulation of a strong counter-position.

In contrast, we observed that participants in the Radical Librarians Collective were actively engaged in developing means through which to counter neoliberal hegemonic processes across the UK's library sector, including in English academic librarianship. Demonstrating, in accordance with the Gramscian framework, that neoliberal hegemony is not complete. The Radical Librarians Collective appears as a positive new initiative. Interviews with RLC Librarians highlighted their commitment to “praxis”, illustrated in their collective processes, critical self-awareness and reflection, and their commitment to everyday action. However, close observation of the RLC illuminated some areas where the collective's organisational structure and processes might be developed, thus enhancing RLC's potential as an inclusive and radical space through which neoliberal hegemony within academic librarianship, and across the wider sector, might be countered.

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